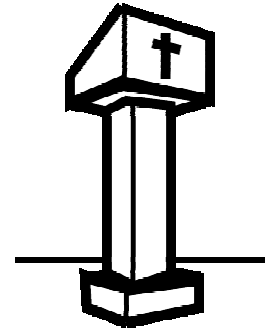


Sermon Synopsis
Christmas Eve Service, 2011
Preached by Fr. Peter Champion



Beasts, Shepherds and Astonishment

When was the last time you stopped and thought about the manger scene which is such a familiar part of our Christmas celebration? Here's the one our children set up at our 5 p.m. service. We see Jesus, of course, along with Mary and Joseph. We see townsfolk, and we see sheep and shepherds. But tucked away in the scene are 2 figures a manger scene wouldn't feel complete without. I'm talking about the ox and the donkey, or as we often hear it referred to, the ass.

If you compare the scene with what's described in Luke's Gospel, you'll discover that there is no mention of the ox and ass. Neither is there one in Matthew's description on the birth of Jesus. Yet, from the earliest depictions of this scene, we almost always see these 2 creatures—usually sitting comfortably in the background, with the ox chewing its cud, and with benign looks that could almost be called smiles on their faces. Some early pictures even show these 2 with bent front knees, almost bowing in an ungainly way. I can't tell you how much of a smile I get from that mental image.



And here's an amazing thought—other than Mary and Joseph, the ox and ass were the first to see the baby Jesus. Not exactly what you'd expect for the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of David. For such an important birth, we'd imagine the first ones to see the baby would be rich and powerful people. Perhaps kings or religious leaders. Or the Roman emperor. Or the 3 wise men. But an ox and an ass? Why is that?

Some of the early church fathers asked that question. One of them, Origen, conjectured that the animals were first because they are docile and obedient, in contrast to stubborn and willful and disobedient humans. I like that, but I'm not sure it tells the whole story.

And the next ones to see the baby? Luke tells us that it was a group of shepherds who'd been guarding their flocks by night in the fields. The announcement was made to the shepherds by an angel, and they were surrounded by a heavenly host singing praise to God. As they visited the babe and saw him exactly as described by the angel, they too were filled with wonder. Again, we're left asking why that is the case.

I'd like to suggest that animals and shepherds were the first to see the baby Jesus exactly because they had no status in the society of the time. The notion of animals of animals as pets is of some antiquity, but most domesticated animals were, and often

still are, considered tools. Humans lavished little affection on animals—they were there to be used and, when no longer useful, to be disposed of.

Shepherds were considered undesirables because they lived out in the fields with animals rather than in homes with families. They were dirty and smelled. They were morally suspect because of the suspicion that, minus female company, their relationships with their sheep were perhaps less than chaste.

Did God allow domestic animals and unsavory shepherds to see the newborn first to show that he recognized their innate dignity, even when society didn't? Wouldn't it be just like God to upset the apple cart like that?

On this past Wednesday night, Susan and I took part in a Las Posadas service at the West County Detention Center in Richmond, where hundreds of people are incarcerated on behalf of ICE—the Immigration and Customs Service. A group of us have been gathering there monthly as a way of witnessing to the dignity of these people—documented or not—and to stand in solidarity with them. One of the participants was a Latina woman from La Santissima Trinidad Episcopal congregation in Richmond. As she began to read her lines, she started to weep. Javier Torres, her priest, came over and stood next to her, silently placing one hand on her shoulder. Several of us followed his lead and the woman was able to read her part. It was a powerful experience of how unvalued and disrespected some of our brothers and sisters are made to feel.

Perhaps the animals and shepherds were the first to see the holy infant because they are the ones who are the least invested in things the way they were, and the most open to recognizing when God is doing something new and radically different. The animals and shepherds were the most able in their world to experience astonishment at what was doing. Astonishment that upsets complacency and makes us shake ourselves out the sleepy sentimentality that too often passes for faith.

Looking at the story this way helps us get beyond the sentimentality that Dan Clendenin calls “one of the greatest obstacles to genuine Christmas faith.” Seeing the manger as an expression of God's care for the least and the lowest as well as the more socially acceptable. And seeing the manger this way helps us see the world in a new way. Animals and shepherds, angels and a baby mean the nothing will ever look the same again.

So whatever you've brought with you to church this evening, whether it is joy or sadness, a feeling of being valued or devalued, respected or disrespected—know that the manger is God's way of telling you that you are a person who is loved and whose dignity deserves to be respected.

And knowing that about ourselves, we are invited to leave here this evening to see the world around us—all of it—with new eyes. May we carry the message—in word and deed—that all people are God's beloved.